

Aaarghttack of the clones

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Most of us live in cities, blighted with skyscrapers, traffic congestion and pollution. Sometimes you just need to get away from it all, take time out to visit the countryside ...and decimate it, raze villages to rubble and dine on the former inhabitants. Washing them down with a vintage bottle of Chianti.

It's what holidays are all about. Ravaging architecture and landscapes of scientific and cultural significance, biting human heads clean off their puny shoulders, and stealing priceless heirlooms.



Where Bally Midway went wrong with Rampage is setting it in famous *urban* locales around the globe. Hardly a break from the routine is it? Luckily - a year later in 1987 - Melbourne House stepped in to set the record straight. They should have called it "Chuck over the sun cream, I'm hitting the beach" rather than "Aaargh!"



Still, with a title beginning with three As it was bound to appear as the first entry in any mail order software catalogues and magazine adverts. Genius! Er, well... right behind all the software with a title starting with the number 1. According to the Hall of Light database there are 44 for the Amiga alone.

"The game is very similar to Rampage in its total destruction approach, but no less playable for that."

Computer & Video Games (80%, Amiga version, July 1988)



'Aaargh!' could easily be the panicked reaction of its publishers when the Rampage crew's lawyers came knocking with a cease and desist order. It's astounding that they weren't sued into bankruptcy given that the concept, look, feel and *almost* one of the protagonists were lifted from Bally Midway's coin-op arcade game.



Maybe they didn't want to rock the boat in case the defence raised the issue of the glaring similarities between Rampage and two earlier frenzied-supersized-monster games developed by Epyx. 'Crush, Crumble and Chomp!' (1981)...



...and its kind of spiritual sequel 'The Movie Monster Game' (1986).



Each revolves around channelling various knock-off analogues of famous Japanese Kaiju monstrosities, revelling in their rabid compulsion to stomp major cities to dust and snuff out the military as they battle in vain to contain the outbreak.

Crush, Crumble and Chomp! is a 2D turn-based affair that - ahead of its time - allowed the player to create their own unnatural disaster, deciding how to spend their allocation of 'crunch credits' on various abilities. It features four cities; San Francisco, New York, Washington D.C. and Tokyo. The rest of the world was safe presumably because they didn't stock Chewits.

The Movie Monster Game is more closely aligned with Rampage in that it takes place in real-time, albeit via an isometric viewpoint. Again it stars a selection of copycat horror B movie icons, though curiously also an *officially* endorsed pixelated interpretation of Godzilla. Amongst the rip-offs are alternative variants of The Blob, Mothra, the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man, and a famous Transformer you may recognise. We now wreak havoc in New York City, San Francisco, London, Tokyo, Moscow, and Paris.

Whereas in Rampage the player can choose to assume the role of King Kong, Godzilla or the Werewolf in London, Aaargh! limits our options to an ogre-cyclops or a dragon, not too dissimilar to Lizzie (Godzilla from Rampage).



Rampage allows up to three players to simultaneously engage in monster mayhem warfare, whilst two is the limit in Melbourne House's revamp of the arcade classic. At least in the original arcade incarnation.



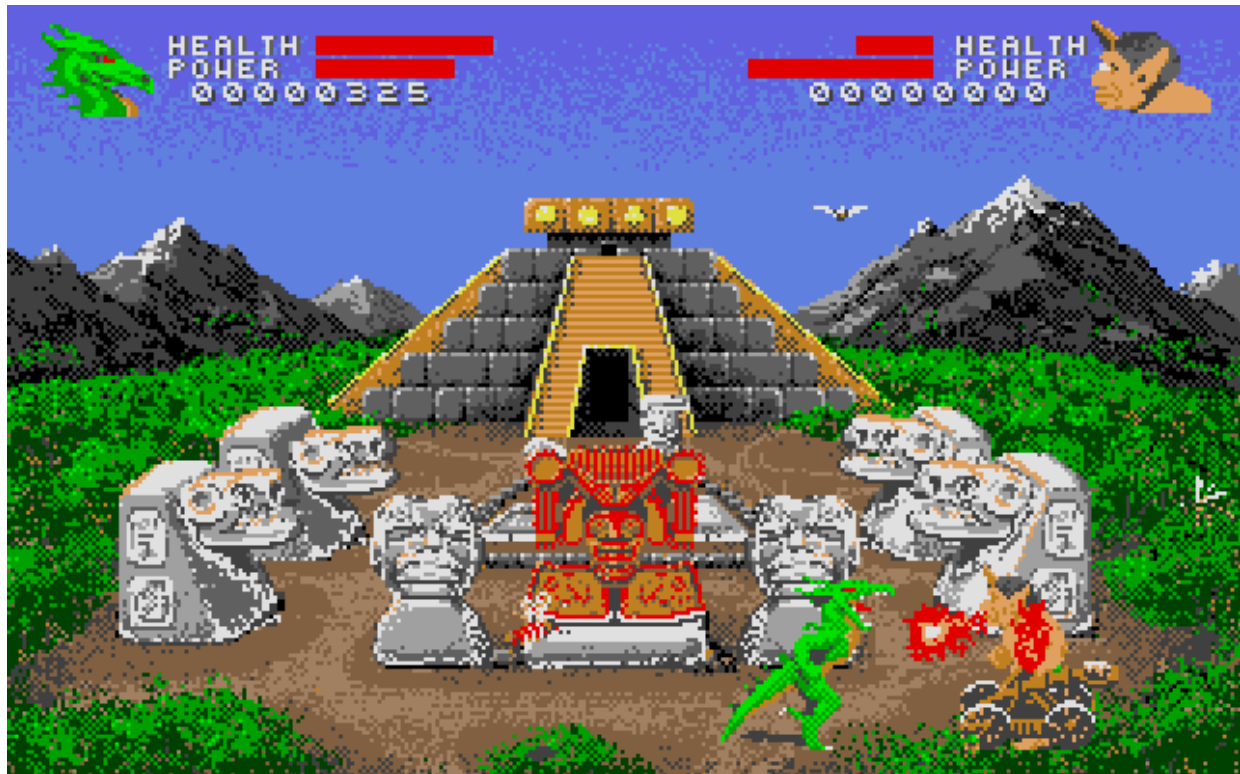
Sadly, emerging on the home systems (Amiga, Atari ST, Amstrad CPC, MSX, DOS, Spectrum, C64, Apple IIgs), this multiplayer option was dropped from all but the Atari ST port, entirely ignoring the essence of Rampage's appeal. It was an odd turn of events for the Amiga 'interpretation' in particular since the arcade original was designed with Amiga 'microcomputers' and ran on the same (customised) hardware we had at home, what with it forming part of Mastertronic's 'Arcadia Systems' collection. The A500 wasn't exactly 'micro' if you ask me, it was a behemoth! Smaller than a mainframe I suppose.

"Amiga Aaargh! lost a lot when the two-player mode was removed from the home computer version. The C64 game also suffers from this, and overly simplistic gameplay, but the main fault is the difficulty level. Manoeuvring your monster around village huts while dodging giant insects is frustrating and repetitive. For very patient and forgiving fire-breathing monsters only."

Zzap! (26%, C64 version, October 1989)

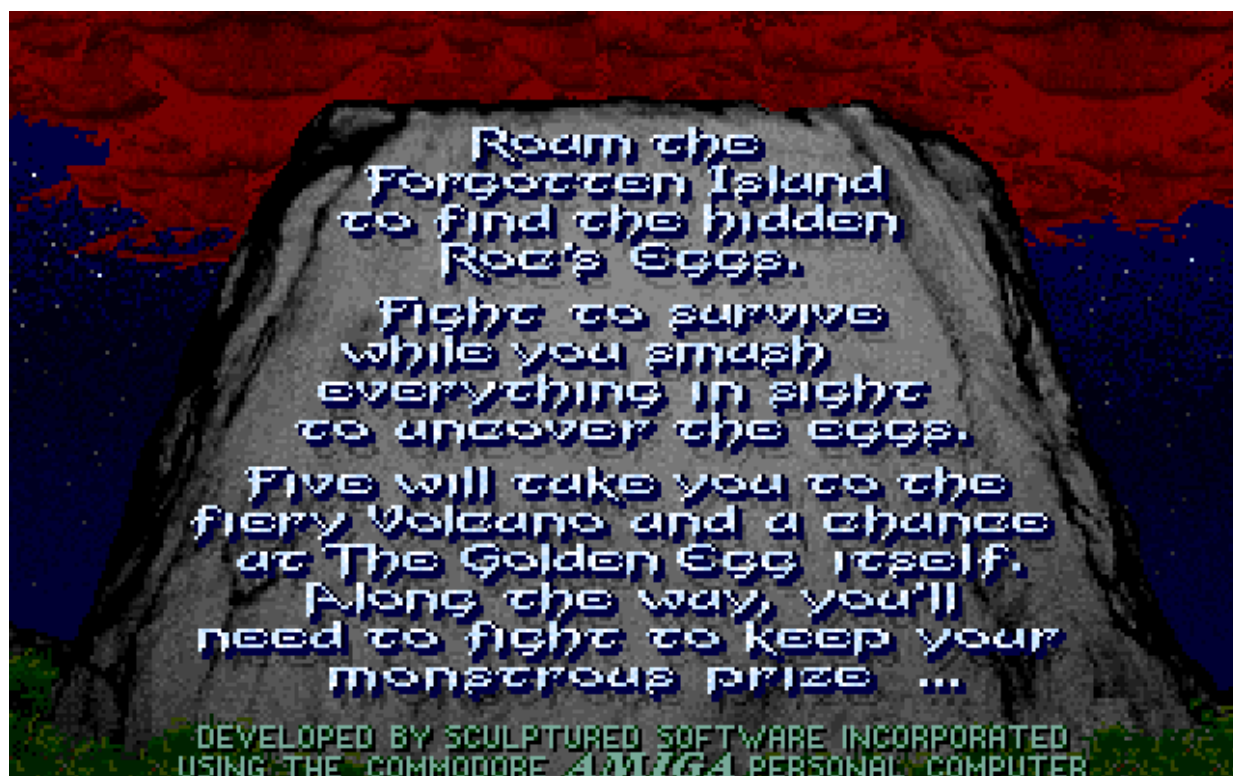


Released originally in 1987 in the arcades, and the Amiga the following year, it wasn't until October 1989 that C&VG, Zzap64 et al got chance to check out the ports to the Atari ST and 8-bit systems. So much time passing in-between explains the reinstatement of the full two-player experience accorded to ST owners. I suspect that programmer, Dave Leitch, and graphician, Nick Speakman, took on board the feedback and made any necessary improvements.



"ST Aaargh! is easily the most enjoyable of all the versions currently available, but it's far too easy to complete on your own. An in-game tune wouldn't have gone amiss, but otherwise the sound effects and graphics are nice."

Computer & Video Games (71%, Atari ST version, October 1989)



Set on the remote island of Darance (definitely not *Colossa*), which somehow encompasses real-world locations from all over the globe, *Aaargh!* is a single screen action game that entails destroying one village at a time, mauling the indigenous populations who get in our way and stealing roc's eggs hidden within the fortifications. A 'roc' I should point out is an enormous legendary two-headed bird of prey whose mythology emanates from Arabian folklore. Being humongous - able to grip an elephant in their talons! - they laid eggs to match, and since these were bigger than any ever encountered previously they were treated as treasured artefacts. Explorers would foolishly attempt to steal them (and sometimes eat the chicks within), and in retaliation, the terrifying creatures would obliterate their ships by dropping boulders on them from a great height, as depicted in the Fifth Voyage of Sinbad.

They should really have known better since rocs had previously been encountered in the second of Sinbad's epic

expeditions. There Sinbad is stranded in a remote valley littered with diamonds, amongst a slithering mass of mammoth snakes that constitute the roc's typical diet. Sinbad escapes by strapping a hunk of meat to his back which one of the rocs proceeds to carry off to its nest. Executing this 'cunning plan' Sinbad earns his freedom as well as a now jewel-encrusted steak for tea! A common ruse sailors would employ to harvest the all too tempting gems without becoming snake food themselves. Rocs, Cyclopes and our titanic bipedal dragon chum feature prominently in the 7th of Sinbad's outings, cementing the connection. They're pretty faithful translations except that Taro walks on all fours and spends most of his time chained up like a guard dog, and Cyclops should have goat legs and cloven hooves. Close enough.

Out of spite Sokurah the magician shrinks Sinbad's bride Parisa, Princess of Chandra, to the size of a Borrower. To restore her he needs a shard of a roc's egg and the cooperation of the unscrupulous sorcerer, who will assist in reversing his spell as long as it culminates in the re-acquisition of the genie's lamp he lost to the Cyclops. This leads the party on a trip back to Colossa, home to the Cyclopes, rocs and Taro. Meanwhile, back on Darance, we won't let a small matter like the roc's revenge deter us. I'm planning what to chuck into my omelette now. Once recovered from the dusty rubble we must we face the character we chose not to embody in a battle of brawn, and not too many brain cells. He wants to keep the eggs and so do we. You see the dilemma?



As beat 'em ups go it's extremely primitive and lacklustre, ironically making us grateful to return to the main event. Which isn't exactly thrilling either.



If we can defeat our opponent five times we toddle off to snag the cherished *golden* egg found at the base of the

island's sacred, anthropomorphic, active volcano. Do that and we're considered the victor, mission accomplished, game over.



Primarily what Aaargh! delivers over and above Rampage is the ability to traverse multiple planes of the single screen environment, lending the playfield a sense of depth.

While all three Rampagers are only armed with their limbs and masticating jaws, Aaargh!'s protagonists both come equipped with fire breath, upgraded in potency by collecting lightning bolts. Setting fire to villages and their inhabitants is so satisfying you'll see arson in a whole new light! Plus, I think the egg quest thing totally justifies it.

B movie monsters were again the inspiration for our two anti-hero stars. We play as either an 18-foot tall, scaly dinosaur-lizard or uni-horned 20-foot tall ogre cyclops with halitosis. While looking distinctively different, in practice they possess exactly the same abilities and control identically.



There are twelve cities to explore, terrorise and decimate. We're good at that being the bad guys. One thing that separates this from most video games where players

automatically assume the hero goodie role. Westernised movies tend to follow the same trend; this being inspired by Japanese ones it makes sense that the usual rules don't apply.

Locations (and Kodak moments) include a Wild West frontier fort...



...medieval castle...



...Roman baths overshadowed by a centaur effigy...



...Taj Mahal 'protected' (haha) by a multi-armed Hindu deity (Kali? Goddess of time, creation, destruction, violence and power)...



...Elizabethan merchant docks...



...Egypt with its Anubis 'guardians' (evil laugh) and pyramids...



...Aztec zone dominated by stone idols and Mesoamerican step-pyramid...



...Chinese pagoda presided over by Buddhas...



...and a Vietnamese village. They've all been well documented by National Geographic now so don't worry about flattening them.

To visit them all without actually mastering the game you can prance around a bit behind the stone statue on level one to

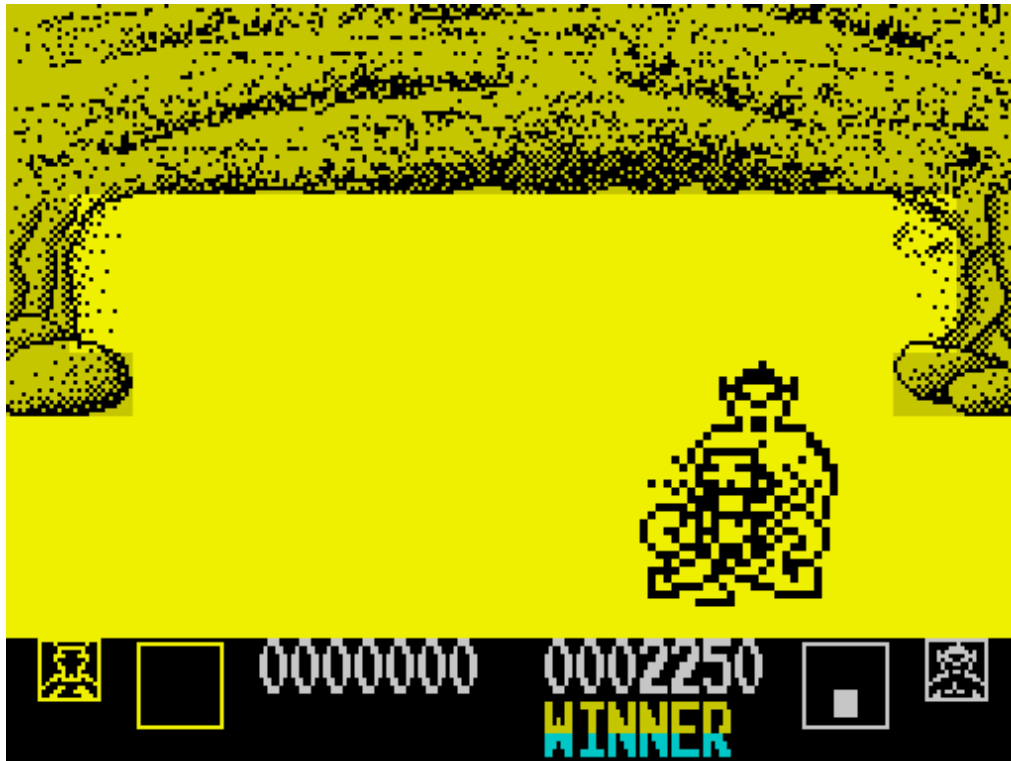
be randomly transported to one of the later stages. Far less stressful than all that joystick wrangling nonsense.

It's all much prettier and the details more intricate and varied than Rampage's tiresome, bland cityscapes. Animated sprites too are convincingly fluid throughout, bringing the environments to life with a degree of finesse we couldn't take for granted during the early stages of Amiga game development. Or the *late* era of Spectrum game history it would seem...



"Small ill-defined sprites hobble around vile backgrounds, while a variety of meanies attack without mercy. As you can probably tell we aren't too keen on the Spectrum version, this is mainly because the horrid background colours make the monsters virtually invisible. In consequence, this makes the game almost impossible to play."

The Games Machine (55%, October 1989)



Scale is spot on; our ogre and dino-dragon tower above the average-sized humans and their dwellings, with enemies falling somewhere in-between suggesting they're overgrown freaks too. We're given their brief backstories in the manual, which don't suggest that they began life as humans, morphing into monsters due to some superhero style catastrophe. Melbourne House let Rampage keep that, which was jolly decent of them.

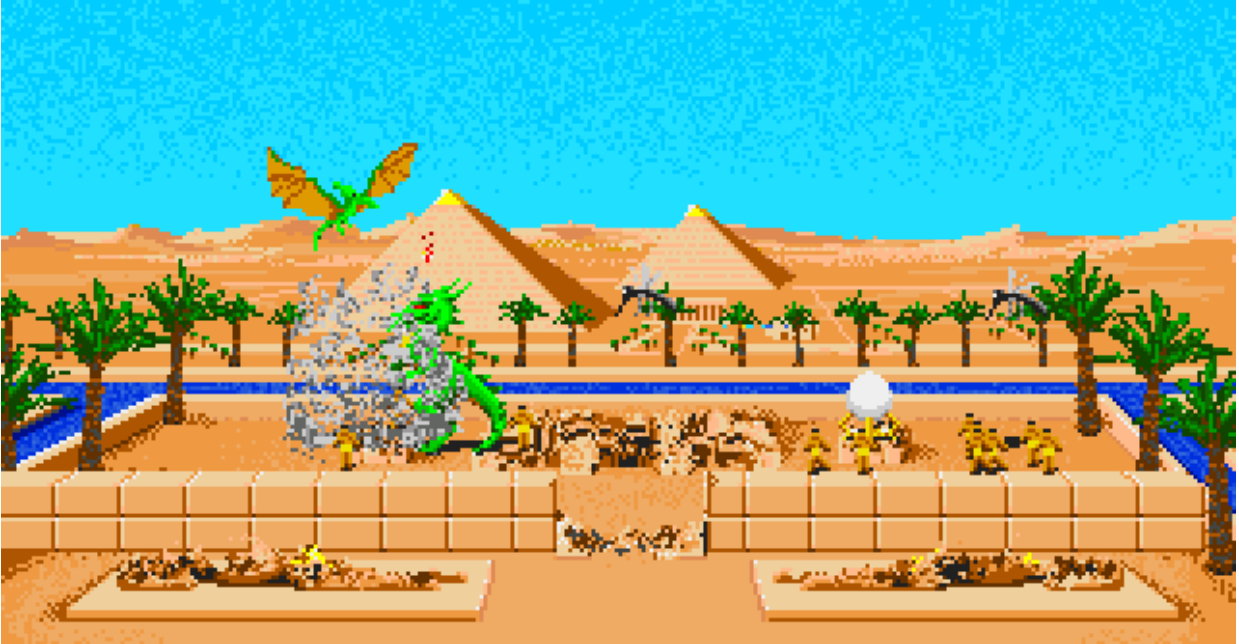
"How's about this for a dire game? The storyline is fantastic; 'the monsters are on the loose... to cause chaos... to inflict terrible destruction!'. Honestly, it's not exactly original, is it? It wouldn't be so bad if Aaargh! brought some terrific new feature to the games playing world, but it doesn't. At budget price, it might just make the grade with average addictivity. The awful graphics and a nigh-total lack of playability make this a thorough waste of money."

Crash! (29%, Spectrum version, September 1989)



I can't say I've noticed their pithy character biographies keeping anyone awake at night. What bothered critics and gamers alike more is the supposedly awful controls. They're actually pretty logical if you bother to glance at the pamphlet manual before leaping in with your size 300 feet. Especially given that Sculptured Software only had a single button joystick at their disposal. Just sole coder, Steve Coleman, in this case. Graphician, Joe Hitchens, took care of the visuals alone too.

You tap the trigger button while the joystick stays central to breathe fire, and hold it down whilst pushing in one of four directions to punch that way. It's important to jab in the appropriate direction shortly after holding fire, otherwise, the manoeuvre fails miserably. Pushing upwards you can take out airborne threats such as mosquitoes, pterodactyls, harpies and hornets.



Whereas pushing downwards lets you grab traumatised fleeing villagers and eat them, or scoop up lightning bolts, slices of pizza, tacos, burgers or other processed Frankenfood.



Simples, like the Ruskie meerkats. Well, until things get so frantic that your technique flies out the window and you start yanking and hammering randomly in the vain hope that it

will achieve something useful. Oh, and you can also become stuck amidst the buildings as you're pounded relentlessly, rendered defenceless, flailing wildly. OK so the critics had a point re: the dodgy controls.

Impressively, atmospheric sound effects, as well as fairly dramatic music, can be heard simultaneously. Even plenty of "bloodcurdling" digitised speech has been implemented. When scoffing the scurrying outcasts our protagonists groan "peeeople!".

"A very primitive multi-level, multi-load, beat 'em, blowtorch 'em up which'll have you screaming its title each time you die and have to reload!"

Your Sinclair (48%, August 1989)

If they get the opportunity before losing their heads or are trampled to death, the village folk reply with hysterical shrieks of horror as we destroy their silly little abodes. Pfft, whinging snowflake millennials! Moaning about the lack of 26 hour a day access to Snapchat one minute, and droning on about losing their livelihoods and right to live in peace without being subjected to horrific slaughter the next. In my day...

Not that they're vulnerable sitting ducks waiting to be crushed mind you. They defend their precious homesteads with medieval Trebuchet catapults and gunpowder artillery, extinguishing fires to save their architecture should we fail to take out the wells.



Should the 'Aaargh! metre' fill to bursting point our head and torso do precisely that, showering the ground with blood and guts. Dying is rarely this much fun! We should do it more often. I know it's on *my* bucket list.

Can you guess what our brutish cannibals grunt whenever they eat health-boosting food? Nope, *wrong*, it's "foooooood!". Oh, you said that? My mistake.

There's more; they growl "power" when collecting lightning bolts and - grinning with superiority - roar triumphantly upon winning an egg. Holding it aloft for the speechless loser to covet and mourn as they sit idly on their bruised backside.



OK, so they don't have the most *evolved* vocab repertoire ever. That it exists at all is a gift. A few other compelling nuances that make Aaargh! a bit special for a 1988 game are worth noting. Some flying creatures swoop across the playfield horizontally, meddling with our eggy reconnaissance errand, whilst birds glide into the scenes from yonder distance, dive-bombing as they grow larger.

(Father Ted is demonstrating some plastic toy cows to Dougal)

Father Ted: OK, one last time. These are small... but the ones out there are far away. Small... far away... ah forget it!

I still don't get it, although *somehow* they help to convince us we're occupying a 3D world. Clever.

These birds, as well as everything else, owns a shadow which is a nice touch of the ATD variety. As is the progress-

delineating map that gives us a glimpse into the upcoming stages.



Despite the extra bells and whistles, like Rampage, what impedes Aaargh!'s appeal and longevity is the limited gameplay. Once we've beaten it - which isn't difficult despite the awkward controls - there's little reason to return to repeat the process. That would have been the two-player option's cue to pipe up and widen the scope. Sadly that fell by the wayside for no apparent reason, relegating the game to a brainless, single-player button masher. Pretty scenery, shame about the playability.